

There is **NO** Free Money

Recently, a Leon Valley resident reported that he was targeted in a scam. The following information, from the National Consumers League's National Fraud Information Center are reminders that if a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is a scam.

Telemarketing Fraud

Fraudulent telemarketers understand human nature. We all want to believe that it's our lucky day, that we can get a great deal, or that we can solve our problems.

Older people are disproportionately targeted by fraudulent telemarketers. That's because they're home to get the calls, they have money saved that can be stolen, and they are too polite to hang up.

It's important to know who you are dealing with. If a company or charity is unfamiliar, check with your state consumer agency (Texas Attorney General's Office) or the Better Business Bureau.

Some telemarketing practices are blatantly fraudulent, and you should know the signs. It is illegal for telemarketers to ask for a fee upfront if they promise or claim it is likely they will get you a credit card or loan, or to repair your credit. It is also illegal for any company to ask you to pay or buy something to win a prize or to claim that paying will increase your chances of winning.

Other danger signs of fraud may be harder to recognize. These include, but is not limited to; pressure to act immediately; refusal to send you written information; use of scare tactics; demands to send payment by wire or courier; demands for payment of taxes or customs fees to claim a prize; request for your financial account numbers even though you are not paying for something with them; promises to recover money you have lost in other scams, for a fee; claims that you can make lots of money working from home; and refusal to stop calling when you say you are not interested.

Beware of identity thieves. Thieves pretending to be from companies you do business with may call or send an email, asking you to verify personal information they should already have. If you have any question, contact the company and determine if they are the ones looking for the information.

Be prepared when you answer the telephone. Think about the advice you would give someone else about how to detect fraud, then follow that advice yourself. Use Caller ID or an answering machine to screen calls. Do not hesitate to hang up on suspicious calls.

Internet Fraud

Know who you are dealing with. If a company or charity is unfamiliar, check with your state consumer agency (Texas Attorney General's Office) or the Better Business Bureau. Some Web sites have feedback forums, which can provide useful information about other people's experiences with particular sellers. Get the physical address and phone number of the seller in case there is a problem later.

Look for information on how complaints are handled. It can be difficult to resolve complaints, especially if the seller or charity is located in another country. Look on the Web site for programs the company or organization participates in that require it to meet standards for reliability and help to handle disputes.

Be aware that no complaints is no guarantee. Fraudulent operators open and close quickly, so the fact that no one has made a complaint yet does not mean that the seller or charity is legitimate. You still need to look for other signs of fraud.

Do not believe promises of easy money. If someone claims that you can earn money with little or no work, get a loan or credit card even if you have bad credit, or make money on an investment with little or no risk, it is probably a scam.

Understand the offer. A legitimate seller will give you all the details about the product or service, the total price, the delivery time, the refund and cancellation policies, and the terms of any warranty.

Resist pressure. Legitimate companies will give you time to make a decision. It is probably a scam if they demand that you act immediately and will not take NO for an answer.

Think twice before entering contest operated by unfamiliar companies. Fraudulent marketers sometimes use contest entry forms to identify potential victims.

Be cautious of unsolicited emails. They are often fraudulent. If you are familiar with the company or charity that sent you the email and you do not want to receive any further messages, send a reply asking to be removed for their email list. However, responding to unknown senders may simply verify that yours is a working email address and result in even more unwanted messages from strangers. The best approach may be to simply delete the email.

Beware of imposters. Someone might send you an email pretending to be connected with a business or charity, or create a Web site that looks just like that of a well-known company or charitable organization. If you are not sure that you are dealing with the real thing, find another way to contact the legitimate business or charity and ask.

Internet Fraud (continued)

Guard your personal information. Do not provide your credit card or bank account number unless you are actually paying for something. Your social security number should not be necessary unless you are applying for credit. Be especially suspicious if someone claiming to be from a company with whom you have an account asks for information that the business already has.

Beware of dangerous downloads. In downloading programs to see pictures, hear music, play games, etc., you could download a virus that wipes out your computer files or connects your modem to a foreign telephone number, resulting in expensive phone charges. Only download programs from Web sites you know and trust. Read all user agreements carefully.

For more information, you can visit the National Consumers League's National Fraud Information Center Web site at www.fraud.org